

Staff Involvement in the Schoolyard

Regina M. Mueller

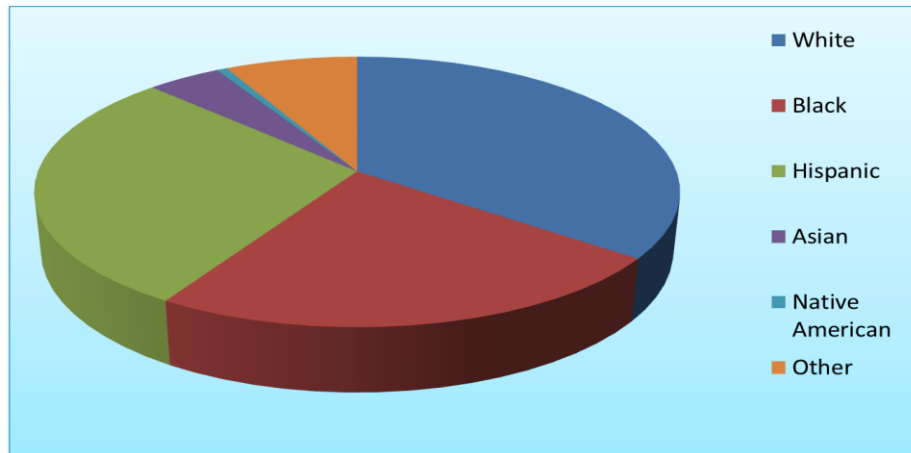
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Introduction

The city of Beach Park is located at the upper north-eastern corner of Illinois and is considered a suburban school. There are four feeder schools that house grades Kindergarten through fifth grades. The schools are Howe, Oak Crest, Kenneth Murphy, and Newport. The Illinois State Beach is located a mere six miles from the school property. The population of the city is 26,248 (2003 demographics report). Within this population, seventy-two percent own homes while twenty-four percent are renting. Beach Park's overall population is sixty-six percent Caucasian, twenty-three percent are Hispanic, seventeen percent are African-American, ten percent are other racial background (uncertain what is considered other), three percent are multi-racial, three are percent Asian, and less than one percent is Aleut/American Indian. The average income per household is between \$50,000 and \$74,999. The per capita income is stated to be \$21,722. ("Beach park: rural," 2006) For housing the mean prices in 2009 were as follows: All housing units: \$200,768; Detached houses: \$230,122; Townhouses or other attached units: \$322,257; In two-unit structures: \$297,846; Mobile homes: \$56,815. The elevation of the city is six hundred ninety feet above sea level. ("City-data.com," 2010) The Beach Park Middle School is located on 39 acres of land. The student population is approximately two thousand students. The school houses sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Approximately half of the property is the school building, parking lot, water tower, baseball/soccer field, and playground; the other half is unused. It has two water retention areas for water run-off from the school building and parking lot, a Burr Oak woodland area, and lastly an area that is in phase one of a prairie restoration.



Beach Park Middle
School
Demographics
White 35.3%,
Black 23.5%,
Hispanic 28.7%,
Asian 4.3%,
Native American
0.6%, and other
7.7%

Question and Why It's Important

I have always felt that wandering in the fields and wooded areas are a useful way to learn about our eco-system and animal habitats along with relaxing with nature. Within our current environment, children do not have the opportunity to "wander" outside for parental fears of abduction and physical harm. The children today are engrossed with technology and video games which keeps them indoors and safe, but childhood obesity is on the rise due to the sedentary lifestyle that we embrace as a payoff for safety. The positive effects for preschool children not watching television and spending more time with parents were increase self-esteem, better nutrition, and reduction of Attention Deficit Disorder symptoms when children played outside in playgrounds, events, parks, pools, and festivals. (Davison, Edmonds, Wyker, Young, Sarfoh,& Jackson, 2011) Just getting out has had an increase in physical benefits. Children are spending less time outside. Natural areas are decreasing as well. Schools are cancelling field trips and recess. There is competition from television and computers, traffic hazards, more homework and other pressures. Most parents state stranger-danger as a main reason. Although the cases of child-snatching has remained the same for two decades and violent crimes has fallen far below the 1975 levels. (Louve, 2007)

The purpose of this project was to understand the reasons why and how to improve the school yard so the educators would use the property to implement their instruction either with environmental education lessons or by using their own curriculum with students. The improvement is seen in the child's self-esteem, disposition, and behavior. When the students are able to focus this can only mean improved test scores which in turn makes the school appear and noted as more academically sound. One example is students with Attention Deficit Disorder; they benefit from being outside. When they enter the outdoors, involuntary attention takes over. This gives the voluntary attention assistance to recovery from fatigue because they have been coping to the best of their ability in the school. The involuntary allows the brain to focus on nature where there are birds, trees, and insects to notice and observe. (Farber, Kuo, Sullivan 2001)

The property has many learning opportunities to offer. Studies have been done to prove that students improve with free writing and behavior when teaching is meshed with using the outdoors as a tool or merely as background for learning, noting observations, and compare information. (Kucinski, S., Carrier, B.) Improved writing skills and creativity has gone up.

The Action-Research question is: Do the teachers have preconceived notions about the outdoors? What would they need to successfully instruct? What current struggles are they experiencing with integrating environmental education with their curriculum? Do they feel taking students outside to be an important task or an inconvenience? Their answers will guide the Prairie Committee (consisting of four teachers) in future decisions in creating a useful learning environment.



Beach Park Middle School

Beach Park, Illinois

39 Acres



Prairie



Wooded Area with Burr Oak
Trees



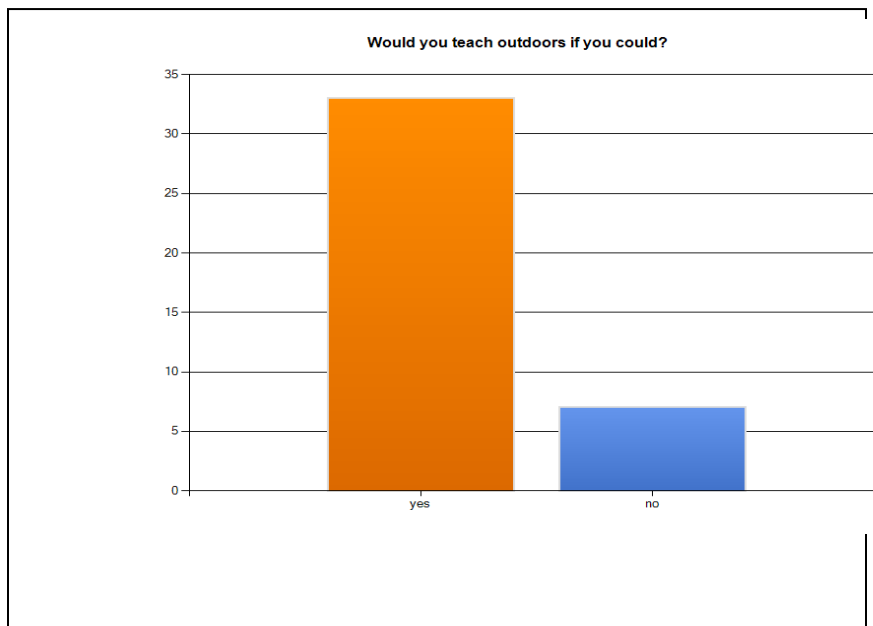
This is one of the two water retention or wetland areas.

Description of the Research Process

The process of the research process involved asking the teaching staff questions. The staff consists of two art, one music, one band, one consumer science, five physical education, two English language learner (ELL or ESL-English as a Second Language), one Response to Intervention, three Behavior Disorder, 3 Special Education Resource, two Full-Instruction Special Educators, eight sixth grade, eight seventh grade, eight eighth grade teachers. Included in the school staff, but not requested to respond to the survey, are the Principal, Associate Principal, Administrative Assistants, School Nurse, Maintenance Engineers, Aides, Lunchroom Supervisors, Social Workers Therapist (Physical Therapy, Occupational/Speech Therapy, Vision Intenerate) building substitute, and substitutes that are in the building. The questions were asked anonymously in Survey Monkey for the teaching staff only. This survey permitted the educators

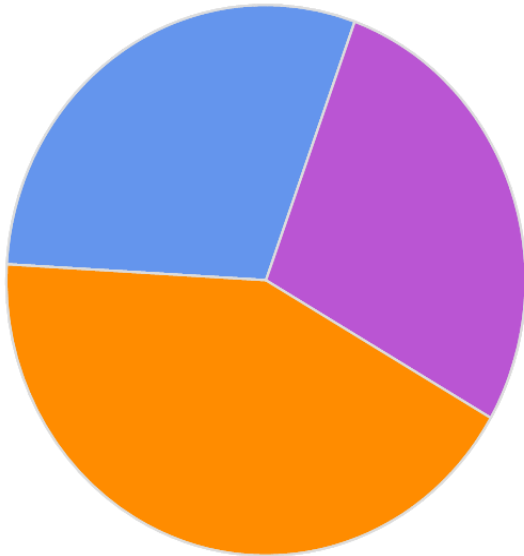
to answer the questions on their own time frame. Out of a staff of forty-five teachers, forty responded. The focus groups were based on grade level. They were approached to answer the questions on their prep periods or lunch. The individual questions were completed during the teachers lunch period, prep period and after school. The trends I saw are created in the graphs.

Organization and Analysis of the Data



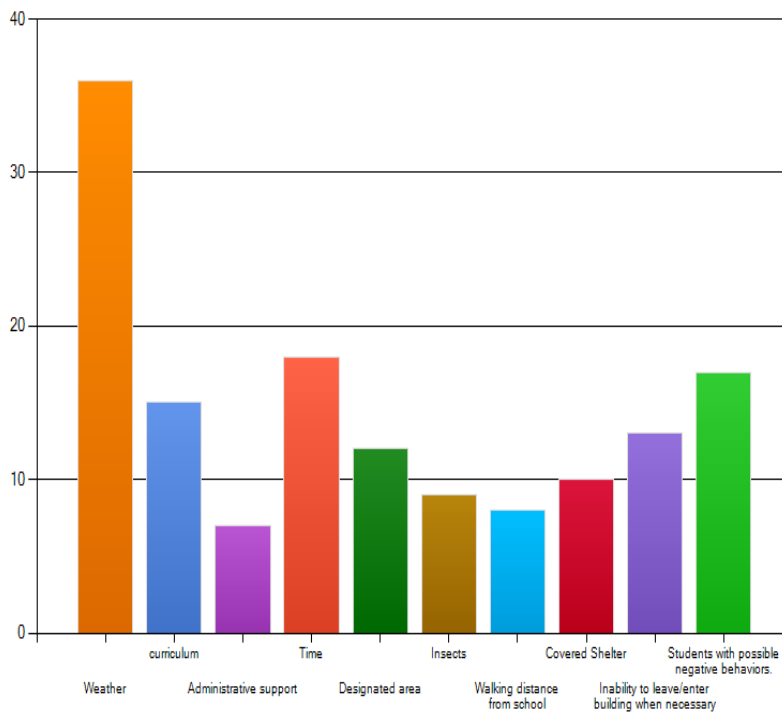
Survey Monkey
Question #1: Would
you teach outdoors if
you could? 82.5 yes,
17.5 no.

What would need to be done to facilitate a suitable teaching environment/experience for you and your students? Check off as you feel the answers apply to you.



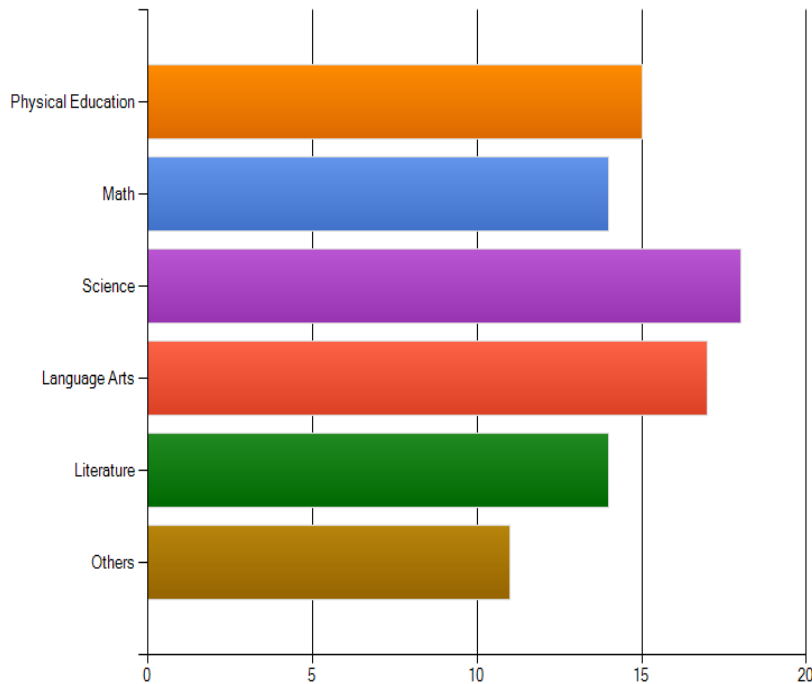
Question #2: What would need to be done to facilitate a suitable teaching environment/experience for you and your students? A clean environment without dirt. Example: tables, chairs, cement ground, dry erase board. 57.5%, Just an open field. 40%, Lessons that have been approved to use through the district. 37.5%.

What elements prevent you from taking your students outside for teaching? Check off all that apply. Let your imaginations soar with this question!!!



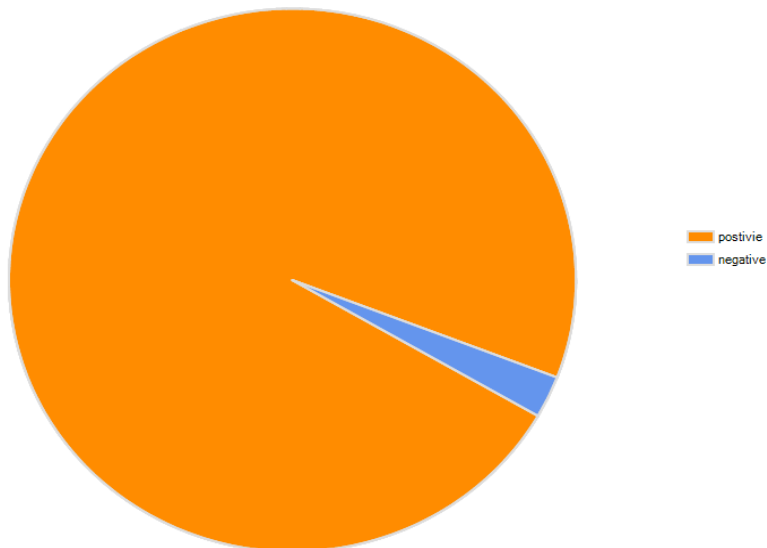
Question #3: What elements prevent you from taking your students outside for teaching? Check off all that apply. Let your imaginations soar with this question!!! Weather 90%, Curriculum 37.5%, Administrative Support 17.5%, Time 45%, Designated Area 30%, Insects 22.5%, ,Walking distance from the school 20%, Covered Shelter 25% , Inability to leave/enter building when necessary 32.5%, Students with possible negative behavior 42.5%.

What type of curriculum would you need support for teaching your subject area outdoors? Check all that apply or that you would be interested in integrating into your lessons.



Question #4: What type of curriculum would you need support for teaching your subject area outdoors? Check all that apply or that you would be interested in integrating into your lessons. Physical Education 37.5%, Math 35% , Science 45% , Language Arts 42.5%, Literature 35% , Others 27.5% .

If you could say to yourself, "In my lifetime, I have had _____ experiences outdoors." How would you reply?



Question #5: If you could say to yourself, "In my lifetime, I have had _____ experiences outdoors." How would you reply? Positive 97.5%, Negative 2.5%.

From the responses received, a majority of the teachers would like a covered shelter that had dry erase boards, tables/chairs, and covered in a shelter. Most would instruct a lesson outside and they'd use the lessons that were provided. Most also felt that weather was an

impending factor. School begins in late August when it is still very warm. The fall is cool and wet. Winters are very cold and snowy followed by spring which has a tendency to be very wet and cool. The only season available to teach outside is late spring, summer, and early fall.

The focus groups were comprised of 2 to 4 teachers from each grade level (sixth, seventh, and eighth). The questions were as followed:



Visual 1
Wooded Forest



Visual 2 Birds/Animals
Native to North Eastern
Illinois



Visual 3
Prairie

1. I brought visuals of outdoors: 1) wooded forest, 2) birds/animals, and 3) prairie. All the scenes were native to the North-Eastern part of Illinois-Lake County.

The participants are asked to describe a picture in three words.

2. Ask for details as to how teaching outdoors may benefit or impede their lessons.
3. Describe what an outdoor classroom should look like (3-5 sentences).
4. What training do they feel is necessary to be an effective teacher for outside?
5. If lessons were supplied, explained, and materials were available would they be interested in teaching about environmental education or applying some type of "planting theme" in a raised bed if it could be applied to your subject?
6. Ask each member how they feel about being outside.

Some of the more notable statements were about the visuals (all pictures consisted of native species from North-Eastern Illinois) were described as ecosystems, prey/predator, and many used colors for description. The more emotional descriptions were calming, soothing, quiet, cricket and frog sounds, and buggy or itchy. Again, many felt that weather was a main concern. They didn't want to be too hot or too cold.

When asked about teaching outdoors some felt it would be distracting. Others felt it would provide more of a real life experiences and allow students to refocus on their studies. The teachers were asked what an outdoor classroom would look like. They were told that there was no budget. The requirements were a canopy, dry erase boards, integrated curriculum, places to sit/write, have access to main office, and bathroom facilities. They felt that training was necessary, would like to have policies in place, aligned to curriculum, and have lessons modeled by a teacher to insure success. When asked about how they feel about being outside most "love it" but have concerns about children with allergies (pollen, bees, grass, etc.) and

would like training to deal with the health issues and/or allergic reactions. They interviewees were engaged and were working as a team to bring ideas to the surface. Many were laughing and enjoying themselves as they exchanged dialog. It was an enjoyable experience.

The individual surveys were very informative as to what the teachers needed. This gave me the opportunity to develop more details and receive clarification in areas I was unsure about.

The questions asked were as follows:

1. Describe a positive experience you've had outdoors, either as an adult or child.
2. Describe a negative experience you've had outdoors, either as an adult or child.
3. Is it essential that your students have value to learning outside?
4. How valuable is it for the student's education?
5. What type of support, do you feel, is necessary to teach outside?
6. If lessons were supplied, explained, teacher mentor, and materials were available would you be interested in teaching about environmental education or applying some type of "planting theme" in a raised bed if it could be applied to your subject?

The positive experience was most described involved camping with family or spending time with family in an outdoor environment. The negative experiences consisted of being caught in strong storms, or being caught in a tornado. The underlying theme was weather. Good or bad, weather will influence experiences. One teacher described her positive experience was when she was in second grade and they explored the school grounds. She described in detail the collection of artifacts she acquired: sticks, rocks, images of tadpoles and fish. She also described the weather as being a pleasant day, good temperature, and sunshine. Another teacher described being caught in a tornado, seeking refuge under a viaduct on his way to college. Both

experiences were seen by the expressions on their faces; the happiness and fear that the weather had effected their involvement to nature.

Most teachers thought it was essential to have outdoor experience for students. Also, most thought it was valuable for a student's education to learn about nature. Support and training was necessary to instruct in or about the outdoors: lessons, workshops, shelters, dry place, surface to write on, and restroom facilities. They also felt that support and permission that was required by administration, and at least 2 adults should be with the students (class sizes are currently twenty-eight per teacher) when going outside. The time allocated for each class was another element (42 minute periods) and good weather was major concerns. It was exciting to hear that most teachers would do a raised bed theme. One comment a teacher stated was that Hispanic students feel that a stigma is attached to environmental ecology because of the "landscaping" profession. This instructor is Latin and feels that her students to need overcome that emotion because the experience of propagated seeds to plants is instrumental in the learning process.

Action Plan and Implications for Practice

This research has enabled me to focus on the staff's needs. I will present to the information to the Prairie Committee. With the data collected, we can decide on what our priorities so we can encourage and foster an appreciation for nature with the environment. I also plan to present the information to the School Board's Long-Range Planning Committee so they are apprised of the findings and will assist us with their support. Currently, with our Prairie Restoration we have created a path with wood chips. The teachers are excited about teaching in the schoolyard; this is encouraging because nurturing a love for nature is what we need implement so our students may grow and appreciate what we have.

Final Reflections on the Action Research Process

The practice of the Action-Research Project has benefitted my teaching by allowing me to expand on my passion and sharing it with my peers at the school. The parts that went well were contacting the teachers to answer the questions and record their responses. The part that did poorly was creating the questions and applying the constructive feedback to enhance various elements. The staff's positive response to the questions was surprising. I felt they may be overwhelmed with responding to the questions. I have encountered some personal changes, insights, struggles and new ideas for future research during the experience. The personal changes are more self-confidence in what I feel needs to be shared with the students. The open areas that our school has should be utilized to its fullest extent; not just for sports or recess, but for exploration and learning. The insights that I have gained is that the teachers really want to do this! They want to teach in an outdoor environment. So there is value to the open space. The struggle that I may face is how to create this covered open space successfully. I would assume that grant writing would be the next step. The new ideas I have are to work on the woodlands and wet lands in stages. We need to establish a plan for a sustainability that is workable. I would do all that I have done the same, except do more focus groups. The teachers' interactions and discussions gave me so much information. Their communication opened up new areas to research, for example the allergy issue. How would we prevent problems for the students and the school regarding this issue?

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